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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine if family configuration was a factor in students' perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. A total of 439 public school and 399 parochial school students in grades 6 through 12 were surveyed. Results showed that students from intact, two-parent homes perceived greater parental concern and support for their schoolwork and greater parental help with their schoolwork than students from single-mother or step-father families. Consistent with those of other researchers who found that school performance is related to family configuration, these results suggest that to promote the development of school achievement values and behaviors among children from non-intact homes requires an increased emphasis on parental concern and support for schoolwork and parental help with that schoolwork. (MDM)

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# Family Configurations and Children's Perception of Parental Behaviors That Support Schoolwork

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# Family Configurations and Children's Perception of Parental Behaviors That Support Schoolwork


## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if students' perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork differed as a function of family configurations. A total of 903 6th-, 8th-, 10th, and 12th-grade students responded anonymously to a questionnaire. Results based on factor analysis, multivariate and univariate analysis of covariance showed that students from intact homes perceived greater parental concern and support for their schoolwork and greater parental help with their schoolwork than students from single-mother or step-father families. The implications of these findings are discussed.

## Family Configurations and Children's Perception of Parental Behaviors That Support Schoolwork

Recent research has focused on the effects of family configurations on students' school achievement. The findings showed that students in two-parent nuclear families had better academic performance and less problematic school behavior than did students in either mother-custody or stepfather families (Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988). Students from intact two-parent families were also found to have fewer absences and tardies, higher grade point average (GPA), and fewer negative and more positive teacher behavioral ratings than did those from reconstituted and single-parent families (Featherstone, Cundick, & Jensen, 1992). Students from single-parent households were found to have significantly lower grades and test scores than do those from two-parent households, and it was found that these effects cannot be explained by the depressed income of single-parent households (Mulkey, Crain, & Harrington, 1992). Compared with students from non-intact families, students from intact families were found to be less likely to drop out (Zimiles & Lee, 1991). It should be noted that research on family configurations has focused on children's differences in achievement, children's perception of parental behaviors that might lead to these differences as a function of family configurations has been largely ignored.

An examination of children's perception of parental behaviors that support school achievement is important for at least two reasons. First, as noted earlier, children's perceptions of parental behaviors that support schoolwork are largely unexplored even though theorists (e.g., Blyth, 1982; Bronfenbrenner, 1977) suggested that children's phenomenal view of their socializing environment is of considerable importance (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Second, although parental behaviors have been shown to be related to children's school achievement, it is parental behaviors as perceived by children rather than parental behaviors per se that help determine exactly what values that guide behaviors that children adopt and internalize as their own to guide their own behaviors, thus becoming their own socialization agents (cf. Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979). The purpose of this study was thus to examine if children's perception of parental behaviors that support school achievement would be different for children from different family configurations. Because previous research showed that children from intact families have higher achievement and that parental concern and support is positively related to children's achievement, it was hypothesized that children from intact families would perceive greater parental support for their schoolwork than children from single-parent or stepfather families.

## Method

Participants. The participants in the study was a sample of 6th-, 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students from public and Roman Catholic schools in an east central region of Wisconsin. The total number of participants was 903, of which 439 were from public and 399 from Roman Catholic schools. Male participants numbered 397 and females numbered 506. In terms of grade levels, there were 274, 223, 227, and 179 6th-, 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders, respectively. In terms of racial makeup, these participants were predominantly white.

Materials. A questionnaire developed by the researcher was used in this study. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items measuring perceived parental behaviors that support schoolwork (e.g., My parents know how I am doing in school). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items measuring students' school achievement value and attitudes toward schoolwork (e.g., Doing well in school would mean a lot to me; Schoolwork is an important part of my life). The third part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions asking the participants to indicate their gender, grade level in school, birthday, head(s) of household, father's and mother's education, their grades (school marks) in school, and ethnicity.

Procedure. The study was conducted in the participants' classrooms or study halls. The homeroom teachers or school

counselors were designated by the school principals to administer the questionnaire according to the instructions given to them by the investigator.

## Results

The validity of the instrument used in this study was first examined through factor analysis and internal consistency analyses. A principal component procedure with vari-max rotation revealed nine factors, three focusing on students' school achievement value and attitudes toward schoolwork and six on students' perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork. Internal consistency data (Cronbach's alpha) for these nine factors ranged from .73 to .89. The correlations among these nine factors/scales ranged from -.11 to .71.

Since prior analysis showed no significant effects of school type (public vs. Catholic), a one-way MANCOVA was conducted with family configuration as the independent variable, SES, gender, grade level, and achievement of students as covariates, and the nine scales noted earlier as dependent measures. SES, gender, grade level, and achievement of students were used as covariates because these variables could presumably influence students' perception of parental behaviors that support schoolwork and controlling for them could lead to a clearer picture of the effects of family configuration. SES was measured in terms of the average of students' reported education for their fathers and mothers (cf. Bjorklund & Weiss, 1985). Students'

achievement was measured in terms of their self-reported grades (cf. Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). The family configuration consists of intact, single-mother, and mother-and-stepfather families. It should be noted that family types other than these three were represented in the sample, but their frequency was too small to warrant inclusion in the data analysis. Of the participants in this study who had complete data, 645 were from intact homes, 69 from single-mother homes, and 67 were from mother-and-stepfather homes. The results from the MANCOVA showed significant differences among the three types of families in the dependent variables ($F(18, 1534)=2.59$, $p<.001$). Follow-up univariate analyses showed significant differences among students from the three types of families in two of the dependent measures, their perception of parental concern and support for schoolwork, and their perception of parental help with schoolwork ($Fs(2,774)=7.40$, 6.63, $ps<.001$, .001, respectively). An examination of the adjusted means showed that students from intact families perceived greater parental concern and support for schoolwork and greater help with schoolwork than students from other types of families. The adjusted means for perceived parental concern and support for the intact, single-mother, and mother-and-stepfather families are 4.16, 4.04, and 3.91, respectively. The adjusted means for perceived parental help with schoolwork for the three types of families are 3.39, 3.12, and 3.14, respectively. The

standard deviations corresponding to these six means are .54, .61, .69, .88, .84, .76, respectively.

## Discussion

Little, if any, research has been reported in the literature concerning differences in students' perception of parental support for schoolwork as a function of family configurations. In this regard, the present study might be considered a pioneering effort. As noted earlier, students from intact families were found to perceive greater parental concern and support for schoolwork and greater parental help with schoolwork than those from non-intact families in this study. These findings thus offer corroborating evidence to show the negative effects of broken homes on students' school achievement. Specifically, the present findings are consistent with those of other researchers who found that school performance is related to family configuration, as noted previously. This relationship is not surprising because one might expect that intact families, in general, have greater stability, better established role definition of family members, more human and/or material resources at disposal than single-parent or mother-and-stepfather families. Parents from intact families are thus in a better position to show greater concern and support for schoolwork and greater help with their children's schoolwork than parents from single-mother or mother-and-stepfather families. The greater concern and support and greater help with schoolwork might be expected to contribute to

children's achievement. The finding in the present study that perceived parental concern and support for schoolwork correlated .27 with achievement seems to lend support for this argument. This correlation of .27 between students' perceived parental concern and support for schoolwork and their achievement also seems to support the idea that students' achievement behaviors are guided by the values they learned from home through the process of socialization. When parents are seen as concerned with children's schoolwork and offer help with their schoolwork, children learn that schoolwork is important. This value of school achievement that children develop may then serve as a guide for their achievement behaviors. The implication is that to promote the development of school achievement values and achievement behaviors among children from non-intact homes, one needs to consider an increased emphasis on parental concern and support for schoolwork and parental help with schoolwork. This idea is in agreement with the findings of Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter and Dornbusch (1990), who showed that dropouts were more likely to come from families in which they had to make decisions on their own and in which their parents were less involved in their education.

It should be noted that the length of time parents have been remarried and the number and age of children cared for by these parents might affect the research findings. For this reason, further research in this area should take these variables into account.

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